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SUBJECT: TOMSK OBLAST GOVERNOR ON ELECTIONS, RELATIONS WITH
MOSCOW

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Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reason: 1.4 (d).

Summary

¶1. (C) Tomsk Governor Viktor Kress enjoys strong support from the regional population as well as the Moscow elite because he, somewhat like Putin, is seen as a competent steward of his region's economic resources and as a capable manager of the local political system. During discussions with the Ambassador in Tomsk on October 26, Kress outlined an ambitious and progressive vision for economic development beyond natural resource extraction via the intellectual horsepower of Tomsk's six universities and attracting U.S. and other international investment. While noting that center-periphery relations were weighted in Moscow's favor, Kress welcomed the signal sent by Kozak's appointment as Minister of Regional Development. Under pressure from Moscow, Kress agreed to head the United Russia party list for Tomsk oblast in the December Duma elections, and local political observers expect extensive use of administrative methods to bolster the turnout for the Kremlin's party. Kress's continued success as one of the few remaining Yeltsin-era governors is a testament to his ability to sail the ever-changing political winds that steer the relationship between center and periphery. End summary.

Developing the
"Siberian Athens"

¶3. (C) In Tomsk, one in five of residents --nearly 100 thousand people-- attend the city's six universities, which include the oldest "classical" university in Siberia. Governor Kress told the Ambassador in an October 26 meeting that he views Tomsk's intellectual capital as the key to the region's future, especially in the fields of information technology, bio-tech, and nanotechnology. He has set what he terms an "ambitious" goal of creating 50 thousand knowledge-based jobs over the next twenty years. Implementing this plan, however, will require the region to create a welcoming environment, including affordable housing, for university graduates --up to 70 percent of whom come from other oblasts. In pursuit of his goals, Kress has sought to foster the creation of small- and medium-sized businesses and, under his leadership, the region has won a competition for the right to establish a special economic zone with tax and financial benefits.

¶4. (C) Building new infrastructure is a central part of Kress's economic plan. His administration is planning an international airport as well as mega-projects, like the building of a northern rail line. In order to develop the region's tourism potential, Kress has worked to protect and restore Tomsk's large stock of architecturally-significant

wooden houses. (Kress criticized the mayor of Tomsk, currently in pre-trial incarceration on bribery charges, for allowing developers to demolish one of the city's historic neighborhoods.) In order to save the historic center, Kress has lobbied for changes in zoning rules, which currently require builders to appeal to Moscow for permission to convert agricultural land on the city outskirts into residential plots; a process that currently takes more than six months to complete.

¶ 15. (C) Kress appealed to the Ambassador for assistance in attracting U.S. business to Tomsk, especially in creating a "partnership" with a northern U.S. state. His administration has a capable and active international relations staff, and the Governor goes abroad at least three times a year to promote Tomsk's investment potential. Tomsk currently has a partnership program with Liaong province in China, Alsace-Lorraine in France, and with two German regions - Baden-Wurtenburg and Lower Saxony.

Center-Periphery Relations

¶ 16. (C) Kress characterized the relations between center and periphery as skewed heavily in Moscow's favor, but he thought that the appointment of Dmitriy Kozak as Minister of Regional Development would help. Kress considered Kozak a capable administrator, with first-hand experience, as Southern Polpred, of the issues facing regional leaders. (Kress's optimism was perhaps fueled by Kozak's advocacy, in an October 25 appearance at the Federation Council, of increased regional autonomy and greater local control over finances.)

¶ 17. (C) Other commentators said that the takeover of local oil

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producer Tomskneft by the state-controlled oil company Rosneft had fundamentally changed the balance of power between Moscow and Tomsk. Tomskneft had invested heavily in local universities and society when it was controlled by Mikhail Khodorkovskiy's Yukos. Rosneft, according to local newspaper "Tomskie Novosti" Editor Aleksandr Krasnoperov, "does not care about the interests of the region." He pointed to the oblast's financial woes since Rosneft --which had overpaid its taxes in 2006-- stopped further payments to the region until it was fully reimbursed. (Originally, Rosneft had agreed to amortize the repayment over three years, according to Krasnoperov.)

The Limits of Progressivism

¶ 18. (C) Kress earlier this year bowed to pressure to head the regional branch of United Russia (YR) and is number one on the party's regional Duma list. Tomsk has traditionally been a more "liberal" region, if only because of the large number of students and intellectuals. The governor predicted that the Communist Party (KPRF) would do well in the coming election, but noted that the Union of Right Forces (SPS) also had a strong following in Tomsk -- more so than in most regions of Russia.

¶ 19. (C) The head of the Yabloko party and member of the city legislature, Vasiliy Yeremin, complained that YR had all the advantages: control over administrative resources and a dominant position in the media. In his telling, the large number of universities was actually a negative, since the students tended to vote as "instructed." (Yeremin claimed that SPS did well in Tomsk because the Prorector of the Radio Technical University, who was in the leadership of the regional SPS branch, directed his students to vote for the party.) Moreover, he claimed that government workers, including teachers, doctors, and bureaucrats tended to vote as their bosses recommended.

¶ 10. (C) Krasnoperov agreed that administrative pressure on

students skewed voting patterns in the city -- Tomsk oblast's major population center. Krasnoperov cited statistics from one of the city districts in which more than 60 percent of the students had voted in local elections, while only 20 percent of the "non-student" population had cast their ballots. Krasnoperov predicted that the election would largely follow the pattern established during the March elections for the regional legislature, in which YR took almost half of the vote (reftel). He expected that the KPRF and the mercurial Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party (LDPR) would each win about 13 percent of the vote. SPS was expected to garner about 8 percent.

Ambassador in Lively
Exchange with Tomsk
State Students, Participates
in Rule of Law Roundtable

¶11. (SBU) In addition to his conversation with Kress, the Ambassador had a lively discussion with about one hundred Tomsk State students, and participated in a roundtable dedicated to a USAID-funded rule-of-law judicial program. The Ambassador also found time to meet health and early care education workers and the disabled children that they work with. He attended as well a roundtable with members of a Department of Energy-funded program that is to permanently shut down the remaining three operating plutonium production reactors in Russia.

Comment

¶12. (C) Kress appears confident that his position in Tomsk is secure and that the turnout for the Duma elections for United Russia will meet Kremlin expectations. His vision for developing Tomsk's economy fits neatly with Putin's plans for Russia, and he has been more successful than most of his contemporaries in maximizing Federal funds to achieve his goals. Even as they complain about the heavy-handed administrative methods used to compel others to share in his vision, critics viewed Kress as a progressive leader who has ably defended the interests of his constituents.

Burns